

A new wellbeing study:

FINNISH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ARE ENTHUSIASTIC BUT EXHAUSTED

– The professional strain is explained by changes in the job requirements as well as concern about teachers and students

The health and wellbeing of school principals in Finland has been widely assessed for the first time. The Finnish Association of Principals has started a Principal Barometer as part of the international Principal Health and Wellbeing initiative. “The Principal Barometer supplies important information about the wellbeing of principals. Finnish principals are excited about their job and often feel like they are doing important work. A great worry is the large number of exhausted professionals and those at risk of exhaustion”, says Antti Ikonen, President of the Finnish Association of Principals.

OVER A HALF (55.4 %) OF FINNISH PRINCIPALS find their work exciting. They see their job as meaningful and enjoy new challenges and opportunities to develop continuously. The enthusiastic principals also feel empowered and tend to actively shape their own work.

“They also feel like they can get the necessary support, and that their job offers them a good work-life balance”, Professor of Educational Psychology **Katariina Salmela-Aro** says.

The Principal Barometer is the first study investigating the health and wellbeing of principals in Finland. It is part of the international *Principal Health and Wellbeing* initiative, steered in Finland by professor of educational sciences and neuroscientist Minna Huotilainen and professor of educational psychology Katariina Salmela-Aro in collaboration with the Australian professor Philip Riley within the Cicero Learning network hosted at the University of Helsinki.

The Principal Barometer was started on the initiative of the Finnish Association of Principals.

“It is very important that we now have specific research data on the wellbeing of principals. An enthusiastic and motivated principal has a great impact on the whole work and educational atmosphere. If the superior’s resources are not up to par, this will have negative consequences on the whole

working community and, what is most troubling, on the whole educational community reaching all the way to students”, **Antti Ikonen** says.

ALMOST HALF OF ALL PRINCIPALS SUFFER FROM EXHAUSTION OR RISK OF EXHAUSTION

Besides demonstrating enthusiasm, the Principal Barometer shows that many principals are also exhausted (11.5 %) or have a clear risk of exhaustion (33.4 %).

According to **Katariina Salmela-Aro**, principals who risk exhaustion no longer perceive the meaningfulness in their work and face emotional challenges and conflicts of roles. Exhausted principals seem to literally collapse under their workload.

“The heavy workload is especially evident among principals, and the new national core curriculum is perceived as very challenging”, **Salmela-Aro** says.

The Principal Barometer was conducted as a combination of a survey and a physiological study. Heart rate variations, stress, sleep, exercise and recovery rates were measured on a Firstbeat analytics device and with the **Oura Ring** sleep and activity tracker. According to neuroscientist **Minna Huotilainen**, physiological data can help examine the overall strain and how workplace stress is visible also at night and during free time.

“According to this study, the characteristics of work do not define the health and lifestyle of principals, but it is rather the principals’ lifestyle that affects their work. Those principals who get plenty of exercise in their free time also got a lot done during the working day. With the group of exhausted principals, a defining finding in both research materials was that stressed out principals have a strong feeling that they are not in control of their own work”, **Huotilainen** says.

CHANGES IN WORK ARE VISIBLE IN THE RESULTS, ADDITIONAL TRAINING IS NEEDED

Antti Ikonen from the Finnish Association of Principals feels that the study results clearly show the changing nature of work. Workloads have grown in recent years and the principal’s job description has widened to include more and more administrative tasks. The strain is further intensified by larger school units, problems with indoor air, and a concern for the resources of teachers and students.

“Principals are teachers by training, and the current qualification diploma is not sufficient to handle the various executive tasks as they differ greatly from core teaching tasks. The Finnish school system has been developed strongly through the teacher’s role and core and complementary training for principals has not sufficiently been taken into account. A successful change is not self-evident and requires plenty of good management. Luckily these issues have been noted, and the government intends to introduce effective management systems for schools. At the moment, it is important to put word into action, to devise a plan and come up with the measures to reach these aims”, **Ikonen** says.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Antti Ikonen

President, Finnish Association of Principals
antti.ikonen@edu.liperi.fi • tel. +358 50 549 0071

Toni Lehtinen

General Secretary,
Finnish Association of Principals
toni.lehtinen@surefire.fi tel. • +358 50 300 6780

Katariina Salmela-Aro

Psychologist, Professor of Educational Sciences
katariina.salmela-aro@helsinki.fi
tel. +358 50 415 5283

Minna Huotilainen

Neuroscientist,
Professor of Educational Sciences
minna.huotilainen@helsinki.fi
tel. +358 40 560 8304